

14 JAN 51

Cults called growing threat

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DR. JOHN CLARK
...dangerous

WALTHAM — Under the right conditions, political or religious extremists could brainwash you.

Cultism is growing and is rekindling anti-Semitic hatred among us, according to a Harvard University psychologist who feels people should worry more about the phenomenon.

"The Jews I know are getting scared, and I



believe they should be," John G. Clark, a psychiatrist on the Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital staffs, said Tuesday.

"You don't have to be crazy to become involved with a cult," Clark told about 30 Waltham Kiwanians who sat entranced by his story.

He feels cults like the Unification Church (or Moonies as its followers are called), Scientologists, Hare Krishnas and members of the Divine Light missions — among an estimated one to three million cultists worldwide — are dangerous.

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Cults

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"Even Born Again Christians are playing with fire," Clark said, because their thinking follows an absolutist line. The Weston psychiatrist recently appeared on the ABC-TV show "20-20."

After studying the cultist phenomenon for the last seven years, he concludes its roots reach back throughout history. When social upheavals occur, cults flower because people's reasoning powers become overloaded and may short-circuit.

Clark defines as "dangerous" cult-thinking that hurts people, that breaks apart families and wipes out a person's reasoning powers.

One cult he knows of uses women as prostitutes — as "bait" for the cult to dangle to reel in religious converts. One group chose Boston as a "holy-city" headquarters because the metropolitan area, with its surfeit of colleges filled with potentially troubled youths, is a good "marketplace."

In Clark's opinion, the American Civil Liberties Union is aiding a bad

cause by fighting for these cults' First Amendment rights of free speech.

"You have to use common sense and have the courage to question a group's ethics," he said.

How does a person become converted to a cult in which he may find his personal pride stripped away or his medical needs ignored?

Clark says conversion can occur when people are emotionally vulnerable. They may have problems they would solve if given time, but because of emotional stress, these people are temporarily easy targets.

Adolescents and people who deal with major crises like death and divorce are such targets, he said.

These people are forced by circumstances to look at themselves and the future differently than they had in the past. Hopefully, they can integrate their new experiences with their memories and redirect their lives in a healthy way.

But cultists prey on people in need of emotional support, Clark pointed out.